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## **THE SILENCE OF THE NIGHT: COLLABORATION, DECEIT, AND REMORSELESSNESS**

**ABSTRACT:** Towards the end of the twentieth century, the issue of collaboration with the Third Reich became particularly problematic for deconstructive criticism. The distinction between collaboration and cooperation is often far from clear, however, and in borderline cases the opacity of the motives behind the alleged collaboration may be such that retrospective historical judgements run the risk of appearing arbitrary. In contrast, the decision to remain silent about alleged collaboration can – and should – invite negative moral judgement. On the one hand silence offers evidence of deceit; on the other, silence speaks of an absence of regret or remorse; and in the case with which this paper is primarily concerned, silence is indicative of both deceit and remorselessness.

### **1. Two Wars**

Paul de Man was born in Belgium in 1919, and emigrated to America in 1948. He completed his PhD at Harvard in 1960 and moved to Yale in 1970, where he became a successful and celebrated literary theorist. Four years after his death in 1983, it became public knowledge that he had written one hundred and eighty reviews – at least one of which was explicitly anti-Semitic – for two newspapers run by the National Socialist authorities in occupied Belgium. Howard W. Campbell Jr was born in America in 1912, and moved to Germany when his father was transferred to the Berlin office of his company in 1923. He became a successful playwright in the late thirties and worked as a radio broadcaster for Joseph

Goebbels during the war. In 1960, it became public knowledge that he had been living in New York since his disappearance in 1945, and he was imprisoned in Israel. Campbell committed suicide the night before his trial for war crimes and was subsequently revealed to have been an American agent from 1938 to 1945.

De Man's war appears to have taken the following course. When the Germans invaded Belgium in May 1940, he, his pregnant girlfriend Anne, and her husband fled to Spain. They were denied entry at the border and returned to Brussels three months later.<sup>1</sup> De Man's uncle, Henri was a powerful Marxist politician who advocated collaboration with the Nazi authorities on the basis of shared socialism, and may have been a role model for de Man in the wake of a series of family tragedies that began in 1936. Believing that the war had ended with the surrender of France in June, and with a young son to support, de Man accepted the job Henri had secured for him with *Le Soir* (Belgium's biggest newspaper) in December 1940. Anti-Semitic legislation in Belgium was introduced from October 1940, and de Man's most controversial review was published in March 1941.<sup>2</sup> A year later, the first of ten articles was published in *Het Vlaamsche Land*.<sup>3</sup> At the end of 1941, the occupiers began deporting Belgians to work in Germany as slave labour and Henri exiled himself to France. By the beginning of 1942, de Man was also working for the Agence Dechenne and Toison d'Or, both of which were key elements of Belgian media collaboration.<sup>4</sup> In May 1942 Belgian Jews were required to wear the Yellow Star, with deportations to concentration camps beginning in August. De Man offered various levels of assistance to Jewish friends and acquaintances during this time, including sheltering a Jewish couple from the authorities for a few days.<sup>5</sup> In the latter half of 1942, he was involved in the distribution of *Messages*, a resistance journal published in Paris, beginning with a volume entitled "*Exercice de Silence*".<sup>6</sup> A combination of over-reaching ambition and negligence resulted in the loss of all

three of his publishing jobs by April 1943.<sup>7</sup> De Man spent the rest of the war in Kalmthout, near Antwerp, translating *Moby-Dick* and preparing to set up a publishing house named *Hermès*. He married Anne, by whom he would have two more children in the next two years, in May 1944. De Man was questioned by the *Auditeur Général* in July 1946, but released without charges of collaboration.<sup>8</sup>

In Campbell's confession, he stated the following. He achieved early success as a playwright in Germany and although his works were apolitical medieval romances, they were very popular with the Nazi hierarchy. He married Helga Noth, an actress whose father was the Berlin chief of police, in 1938. Shortly after, he was approached by Frank Wirtanen, an American military officer, who asked him to become an agent. When Campbell's parents left Germany in 1939, he remained and – unbeknownst to his wife – transmitted coded messages to the Allies by means of the propaganda he broadcast over the radio. His propaganda, like his plays beforehand, was much admired by leading Nazis and he was given an honorary rank in the German military. Helga died while entertaining German troops on the Eastern Front and he was captured by the Americans in April 1945, by which time he was a high profile war criminal. Wirtanen told him that the American government would not acknowledge his war service for political reasons, and he was returned to America in secret, living under his own name in Greenwich Village. In 1958, the KGB became aware of his presence, leaked the information to the American public, and planned to kidnap him. The plot was foiled, but Campbell gave himself up to the Israeli government, revealing his identity to a neighbour who was a survivor of Auschwitz. The night before his trial began, Campbell received a letter from Wirtanen stating that he was prepared to disobey his orders and disclose Campbell's war service to the Israeli authorities. With his acquittal certain, Campbell committed suicide, apparently due to guilt over his collaboration.

## 2. Three Charges

This essay is an attempt to answer a single, deceptively simple, question: *what, if anything, did the posthumous accusations of collaboration reveal de Man to have done wrong?* As such, most of the details of his life subsequent to 1946 are beyond the scope of my interest. In the light of Evelyn Barish's recently-published and extensively-research biography, *The Double Life of Paul de Man*, it is nonetheless worth completing the thumbnail-sketch from §1. In 1948 de Man was charged with multiple counts of fraud in connection with *Hermès* and evaded prosecution by fleeing to New York, with Anne and their three children joining her parents in Buenos Aires.<sup>9</sup> De Man began teaching French at Bard College in 1949, where he met Patricia Kelley. Patricia became pregnant by him and they were married bigamously in June 1950.<sup>10</sup> For reasons that are disputed, de Man was accused of collaboration in 1955. He told the Harvard Society of Fellows that he had stopped working for the newspaper when Nazi policies had curbed freedom of speech.<sup>11</sup> De Man taught at Cornell and Johns Hopkins in the nineteen sixties, and rose to fame as the Sterling Professor at Yale, where he remained from 1970 until his death.

Barish characterises de Man as a narcissist and an opportunist, traits that may have been exacerbated by his deeply dysfunctional family, which included a brother who appears to have been a serial rapist and a mother who was clinically depressed (both of whom were dead by 1939). The portrait that emerges from her biography, supplemented by David Lehman's investigations,<sup>12</sup> is of a charismatic sociopath with absolutely no sense of responsibility in either his personal or professional relationships. De Man's frauds and forgeries were as imaginative as they were frequent and the *curriculum vitae* that secured his job at Bard contained fictional dissertation, thesis, and publication titles when he had failed to complete

any higher education whatsoever.<sup>13</sup> De Man published for and against the Nazis, he contributed to anti-Semitism while maintaining friendships with Jews, and although I shall discuss the complexity of collaboration in §3, he seems to have had little interest in either cause. Louis Menand may well be correct when he accounts for the duality upon which Barish focuses by describing de Man as a nihilist, i.e. ‘he believed in nothing.’<sup>14</sup> I am not, however, concerned with broader judgements of de Man’s character and I shall therefore omit discussion of the details beyond those sketched in §1 from my argument.

In a lecture given in 1984, Jacques Derrida recalled his relationship with de Man with great fondness:

It was in 1967, when he directed the Cornell University Program in Paris, that I first came to know him, to read him, to listen to him and there arose between us an unfailing friendship that was to be utterly cloudless and that will remain, in my life, in me, one of the rarest and most precious rays of light.<sup>15</sup>

Derrida would reiterate this sentiment during and after the furore caused by the discovery of de Man’s collaboration. The accusations that were levelled at de Man, his friends, and deconstructive criticism as an intellectual movement, unleashed a particularly passionate anger in Derrida and the tone of his replies to respondents in the *Critical Inquiry* symposium in the summer of 1989 is nothing short of vicious in six of seven cases.<sup>16</sup> This is especially evident in his response to Jean-Marie Apostolidès’ brief comment on de Man. While researching Georges Rémi (Hergé, the creator of Tintin), who worked for *Le Soir* throughout the occupation, Apostolidès discovered that several of de Man’s colleagues at Harvard were aware of his past.<sup>17</sup> He does not include Derrida in this number, but Derrida nonetheless took the accusation personally and I shall have more to say about his reaction to de Man’s wartime journalism in §5. Whether deconstructive criticism was especially vulnerable to unethical

practitioners or whether its popularity caused resentment by academics is not, however, my concern. Setting aside the personal accusations, the resultant discussion fuelled the broader debate about the relationship between literary theory and ethics and was, in Geoffrey Galt Harpham's opinion, responsible for the "ethical turn" in criticism at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> If he is right, then it is some consolation that the effects of the scandal were not exclusively negative.

The question of what de Man's collaboration reveals him to have done wrong has been asked many times since 1987, but the combination of twenty-seven years of hindsight with recent research brings, I believe, an unprecedented clarity to a complex issue the import of which extends beyond de Man's case considered in isolation.<sup>19</sup> I begin my answer by returning to 1989, to Shoshana Felman's defence of de Man, where she identifies three separate targets of moral judgement:

1. the collaborationist political activities in themselves;
2. de Man's apparent erasure of their memory – his radical "forgetting" of his early past;
3. the silence that de Man chose to keep about his past: the absence of public confession and public declaration of remorse.<sup>20</sup>

According to Felman therefore, there are three potential answers to my question: collaboration, forgetting, and keeping silent.

### **3. Defending de Man**

I agree with Derrida when he describes the anti-Semitism in "*Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle*", published in *Le Soir* on 4 March 1941, as 'unbearable'.<sup>21</sup> I also accept that de Man

may have had reasons for working for *Le Soir* that had nothing to do with Nazi sympathies.<sup>22</sup>

At their extremes, collaboration and resistance are easy to identify: abroad, Belgian units served in both the German and British armed forces; at home, Rexist militia assisted the policing of the occupation while resistance groups undertook sabotage operations. In between these extremes lay more passive forms of collaboration and resistance, and a third option – the most prudent given the Nazi predilection for use of force – *cooperation*. The distinction between collaboration and cooperation (and, indeed, cooperation and resistance) is much more difficult to make. Should every journalist who worked for *Le Soir* from May 1940 to September 1944 be regarded as having collaborated rather than cooperated? If so, why should it have been incumbent upon a journalist rather than a farmer to sacrifice his livelihood? Cooperation by journalists inevitably involved publishing Nazi propaganda, but farmers had their produce either bought or confiscated by the Nazis and thus made a more substantial contribution to the wellbeing of the invaders, whether willingly or unwillingly. No one seems to have expected the farmers of occupied nations to stop feeding those nations on the basis that they were also feeding the occupying forces. Is it fair to judge journalists by different standards?

Here is Frank Falla, the deputy editor of the *Guernsey Star*, defending his own work for the Nazi authorities from July 1940 to April 1944:

I had no option but to agree that the German war communiqué, news items and Lord Haw-Haw's daily outpourings should be given due prominence – the front page, nothing less! This I did with my tongue in my cheek and the front page was duly filled with Nazi-supplied news. We thus schooled our own public into accepting the front page as nothing but Nazi news in which we had no hand, and turned their full attention to pages two, three, and four as exclusively ours in which we featured local



news, official notices and civilian affairs. If the Guernsey reader did anything about the front page, he read it cursorily and laughed it to scorn.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to portray the publication of William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw) as anything other than outright collaboration – tongue-in-cheek propaganda is still propaganda – yet one can immediately see the difficulty of the situation in which Falla found himself. Had he resisted relinquishing control of the front page to his Nazi overseer, Kurt Goettmann, he would simply have been dismissed and/or imprisoned and his position filled by another. If no Channel Islander had accepted the position then the paper would have been run by Goettmann, whose command of English was sufficient to the task. What would Falla have achieved, other than placing the livelihood of himself and his dependents at risk? Falla appears to have exemplified all three stances towards the invaders during the occupation: he published Joyce, continued to work as a journalist under the new authorities, and ran an illegal newsletter for islanders. There is a direct parallel with de Man, for whom the publication of “*Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle*” offers evidence of collaboration, the assistance to Jewish associates evidence of resistance, and the majority of his employment evidence of cooperation. One should, furthermore, be wary of judging the actions of an individual from the certainty of hindsight and – more importantly – the safety of a prosperous and stable society where one does not live in day-to-day fear of losing one’s life or day-to-day fear of losing one’s liberty for voicing dissent. Although he finds evidence of anti-Semitism beyond the above-mentioned review, Frank Kermode refers to de Man’s ‘youthful errors’,<sup>24</sup> and concludes his own review with the suggestion that academics direct their critical attention to more worthy projects. That de Man collaborated is difficult to deny, but that collaboration – however reprehensible – was limited in scale and duration.

I am not sure what to make of Felman's second point, the judgement of forgetting or erasure. If "forgetting" is employed in its literal sense, then the charge should be dismissed because no one except for de Man can know how much of the war – if any – was erased from his memory. If Felman is employing "forgetting" metaphorically, perhaps as the erasure of the war in de Man's later writings or in his academic persona, then I think that judgement can be subsumed under her third point, his silence. De Man may have wanted to forget his collaboration, indeed the whole war, but one cannot choose to forget. One can choose to ignore, but the very desire to forget an event maintains its presence in one's mind, ensuring that it is not forgotten. Forgetting about forgetting, therefore, one is left with the collaboration and the silence: unlike the former, the latter cannot be attributed to the circumstances in which de Man was living.

Both Derrida and Kermode disagree with the condemnation of silence. Derrida identifies 'several reasons' for de Man's lack of disclosure and states that:

to provoke spontaneously an explanation on this subject was no longer an obligation. It would have been, moreover, an all the more distressing, pointlessly painful theatricalization in that he had not only broken with the political context of 1940-42, but had distanced himself from it with all his might, in his language, his country, his profession, his private life. His international notoriety having spread only during the last years of his life, to exhibit earlier such a distant past so as to call the public as a witness – would that not have been a pretentious, ridiculous, and infinitely complicated gesture?<sup>25</sup>

Derrida suggests that de Man's 'modesty' motivated his silence,<sup>26</sup> a claim which Kermode appears to support:

Generally speaking, few writers, of whatever kind, and even if conceited enough to think anybody else would be interested, would volunteer to bring their juvenilia to judgment, even if they didn't contain opinions later seen to be embarrassing or perverted.<sup>27</sup>

Barish offers an indirect defence of de Man in her contention that silence was a habit which began in his teens and became more entrenched as he matured. By the time he left the Royal Athenaeum in 1937, he already had plenty of reasons to keep his own counsel: his brother's sexual violence, his mother's suicide attempts, his father's many affairs, and his grandfather's slow and painful death from cancer.<sup>28</sup> *Contra* the defences from modesty and a defence from habit, I shall argue that silence about a morally-tainted past constitutes a moral failure for at least two reasons. But first I return to Campbell, to show why he is worthy of admiration even if one disagrees with his decision to take his own life.

#### **4. Commending Campbell**

Howard W. Campbell, Jr is in fact a fictional character, the protagonist and narrator of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr's 1961 novel, *Mother Night*.<sup>29</sup> Although Major Campbell of the Free American Corps is entirely fictional he has historical counterparts on both sides of the Atlantic. The most notorious are probably two British broadcasters: William Joyce, mentioned in §3, an Irish-American who held a British passport; and John Amery, an Englishman who also raised a unit of British Empire prisoners of war to fight on the Eastern Front. Joyce and Amery had several lesser-known counterparts in America, including Jane Anderson, Robert Best, Herbert Burgman, Douglas Chandler, Donald Day, and Edward Delaney – all of whom broadcasted from Germany during the war. Amery's *Britisches Freikorps* never had more than thirty recruits, but it seems likely that there may have been a larger number of American citizens

scattered throughout the units of the *Waffen-SS*.<sup>30</sup> Accurate contemporary records are unavailable and, unlike the British government, the American authorities did not pursue these German-American soldiers after the war. Vonnegut was himself of German extraction, served in the American infantry, and was captured in the final weeks of 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge. He is well-known for surviving the firebombing of Dresden by taking refuge in an underground meat locker, an experience he recounted in the novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), and he took part in the subsequent search for corpses. The *Britisches Freikorps* was based in Dresden at the time and also involved in the aftermath, so Vonnegut may have been inspired by an encounter with the unit.<sup>31</sup>

The title of *Mother Night* is from Mephistopheles' autobiographical sketch in Goethe's *Faust*,<sup>32</sup> and sets the scene for Campbell's engagement with Nazi Germany as a demonic alliance, and for Campbell as a fallen angel of a sort. There are two passages that are particularly relevant to disclosing Campbell's motivation for his subsequent actions, both of which describe events that occur in 1945.<sup>33</sup> Campbell's second meeting with his handler, whose real name is Harold J. Sparrow, follows his capture and he is surprised by Sparrow's bitterness towards him. Although Campbell has proved to be America's most successful agent, he has also been a very successful Nazi broadcaster, and his identity as an agent is known to only three people aside from Campbell himself. Discussing whether Campbell was a Nazi as well as an agent, Sparrow asks him what he would have done in the event of Germany winning the war and establishing the empire of which Hitler boasted. Campbell responds:

So I projected myself into the situation he described, and what was left of my imagination gave me a corrosively cynical answer. "There is every chance," I said, "that I would have become a sort of Nazi Edgar Guest, writing a daily column of

optimistic doggerel for daily papers around the world. And, as senility set in – the sunset of life, as they say – I might even come to believe what my couplets said: that everything was probably all for the best.”<sup>34</sup>

Vonnegut does not invite negative judgement on Campbell for his honesty. In his short introduction to the novel, while describing the experience of clearing the ruins of Dresden of one hundred and thirty-five thousand corpses, he states:

If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides. So it goes.<sup>35</sup>

But the question eats away at Campbell. Prior to the war, he had succeeded in avoiding a position on the Nazis by his obsessive love of his wife; after the war, there is a brief opportunity for a similar redemption with his sister-in-law, which ends in tragedy. Once she is dead, the question of his identity becomes all-consuming, and Campbell's decision to hand himself over to the Israeli authorities comes as no surprise.

The decision is explained and indeed foreshadowed by the second incident, Campbell's last visit to his father-in-law. After the war, Campbell reads a magazine article on his death at the hands of a mob of slave labourers, written by a former British prisoner of war (reminiscent of Vonnegut himself). The journalist notes that Werner Noth was the head of the criminal as opposed to political police in Berlin and that his only crime was to have been a city police chief in a country ruled by the Nazis.<sup>36</sup> The reader has, however, already been privy to Noth's evacuation of his home. Campbell describes the scene when one of Noth's labourers nearly drops a valuable vase:

Werner Noth shook her a little, trying to arouse an atom of intelligence in her. He pointed to another woman who was carrying a hideous Chinese, carved-oak dog, carrying it as carefully as though it were a baby.

“You see?” Noth said to the dunce. He wasn’t intentionally tormenting the dunce. He was trying to make her, in spite of her stupidity, a better-rounded, more useful human being.

“You see?” he said again, earnestly, helpfully, pleadingly. “That’s the way to handle precious things.”<sup>37</sup>

While the journalist may be correct about Noth’s dedication to the pursuit of murderers, rapists, and keeping the traffic flowing rather than Nazi oppression, his ‘principal offense’<sup>38</sup> was not simply his complicity in Nazi law and order. The offence was to adopt the Nazi view that selected races were sub-human, that it was acceptable to employ slave labourers from these races, that the vase had value but the human being holding it did not. Noth is clearly not a malicious or evil man. He speaks to the labourer in a paternal, but kindly, manner, as if she were an employee or a child in need of instruction. He has completely lost sight of the fact that she is a slave, sent to Germany against her will, with the aim of working her to death in service of the war effort. That is Noth’s crime and all that prevents Campbell from conspiring in the same crime is his secret identity as an American agent.

Campbell is more than an undercover angel sent to hell, however, as his relationship with his wife shows. His feelings for her are not only deep, but obsessive, yet he fails to disclose his recruitment to her. Vonnegut never describes Helga at first-hand, but she is obviously an enthusiastic German patriot and appears to accept the Nazi rulers without reservation. Helga is thus at least as complicit in crimes against humanity as her father and if Campbell is an undercover angel, he is also to some extent a fallen angel. As such, Sparrow’s disturbing

question prompts further introspection for Campbell. What was his real motivation for remaining in Germany? Was it for the purpose of serving a country he left at the age of eleven, for the love of his wife, for the desire to continue his glamorous lifestyle, or a combination of all three? What, on balance, is the nature of his war service? In pure utilitarian terms, it is unclear whether his net contribution falls on the Allied or Axis side of the ledger. These questions, and others, produce a desire in Campbell to confess his sins to the public and to be judged. He is an imperfect angel, for when a chance arises to recreate his *Das Reich der Zwei* – his nation of two – with his sister-in-law, he seizes it. Once this opportunity is lost, however, he can no longer suppress his desire for confession and judgement. When Campbell's eleventh-hour reprieve arrives, he states:

So I am about to be a free man again, to wander where I please.

I find the prospect nauseating.

I think that tonight is the night I will hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself.

I *know* that tonight is the night.<sup>39</sup>

Campbell is not merely bent on suicide – he could have committed suicide in New York at the end of his romantic adventure, or let himself be killed when he is the victim of an assassination attempt. The act of suicide is not therefore particularly significant in judging his character. It is a last resort, the result of his desperation in the face of a freedom to which he feels he is not entitled, and it matters little whether one condones or condemns his decision. What is unquestionably admirable is Campbell's desire to stand trial, because he believes that he is guilty of war crimes in the same way that his father-in-law and wife were, and can no longer live with that guilt. What one admires about Campbell, I suggest, reveals precisely what should be condemned in de Man.

## 5. Silence and Deceit

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with habitual silence or with the decision to keep silent about one's past. Derrida, for example, rarely broke his silence about his Jewish identity and the discrimination he faced under the Vichy regime as a child in French Algeria. In one of the few discussions of his ethnicity, at a colloquium entitled "*Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida*" in 2000, he makes a comment that is crucial to understanding the de Man case:

It is a bit as if a certain way of keeping quiet, of silencing oneself, as if a certain secret had always represented, regarding judaism, regarding jewishness, regarding the condition or situation of being *jew*, regarding this appellation that I hardly dare, precisely, to call mine – it is as if such silence, a determined silence and not just any silence (for I have never, absolutely never, hidden my jewish descent, and I have always been honored to claim it), as if nonetheless such obstinate reserve had represented a kind of guard, a kind of care-taking, of safekeeping: a silence that one protects and that protects, a secret that perhaps keeps *from* judaism, but keeps as well a certain jewishness in oneself – here in me.<sup>40</sup>

Derrida's retreat from speaking about his ethnicity is explained by his desire to avoid being associated with Zionism and as a form of protection against the wound that the early experience left on him, 'the wound that will not heal, that anti-Semitism has left in me'.<sup>41</sup> I shall return to the conception of anti-Semitism as a *wound* below, but my immediate concern is the distinction Derrida makes between keeping silent and hiding. He leaves no room for doubt that he *never, absolutely never*, hid his Jewish descent. To hide suggests shame or deception and in the case of a morally tainting past, the latter is particularly problematic.



Derrida sets great store by de Man's response to the university authorities in 1955, stating: '*He explained himself publicly and in my opinion that is a reason, whatever we might do from now on, not to organize today a trial of Paul de Man.*'<sup>42</sup> There are two causes for concern in this claim. First, de Man can be accorded no credit for this confession – it was not in fact a confession at all, but an explanation in response to a denunciation (though the reason for the denunciation remains uncertain). De Man was thus, at least to some extent, under duress to provide an explanation. Second, his explanation, like his whole postwar career, was characterised by ellipsis at best and deceit at worst. Felman quotes from de Man's letter to Renato Poggioli, the Director of the Harvard Society of Fellows: 'de Man explained that he stopped writing for *Le Soir* "when nazi thought-control did no longer allow freedom of statement."<sup>43</sup> The Nazis took control of *Le Soir* in 1940 and de Man stopped writing for the paper in 1942, so he seems to be suggesting that in the first two years the Nazis did allow freedom of statement. I take this as an outright lie, but if I am wrong, then de Man's explanation implies that "*Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle*", published more than eighteen months before he put down his pen, was his freely-expressed viewpoint. De Man's statement is thus either deceitful or an unintended confession of anti-Semitism, and the evidence suggests the former.

Barish's research has unearthed de Man's only other explanation, which was also under duress, made to prosecutor Roger Vinçotte at the *Palais de Justice* in Brussels on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1946. De Man was not questioned about being employed by *Le Soir*, but about "*Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle*" specifically. He replied:

I can explain this matter because I am known as being the opposite of an anti-Semite. I have always had Jewish friends, I helped them during the war, and they have kept my friendship. Meulepas showed me an article by Eemans violently attacking the

influence of Jews in literature. I protested to De Becker, who told me I could write another article. The article that you have before you aims to show that the Jewish influence in literature is benign, and above all it responds to Eemans's article. I know that it appeared on a page devoted to anti-Semitism, but I was never warned about that and was not responsible for it.<sup>44</sup>

As noted in §3, Barish maintains that de Man made a deliberate contribution to the anti-Semitic page in order to secure his own column. She also claims that the reason Vinçotte failed to prosecute de Man was that he only had time to pursue 'the major players' in the collaboration.<sup>45</sup> This is, however, inconsistent with the picture Barish paints of de Man as being at the very heart of the collaborationist media so the reason for his release without charge remains, like the reason for writing the review, opaque.<sup>46</sup> As such, it seems prudent to withhold judgement on de Man's response to Vinçotte, but not his response to Poggoli, which is unequivocally deceitful.

Derrida only mentions silence once in his initial paper – 'one may condemn the silence'<sup>47</sup> – when discussing this review, but it seems to haunt him in "Biodegradables". In various contexts, he writes: 'to reduce to silence',<sup>48</sup> 'to accuse the silence',<sup>49</sup> 'to silence proper names',<sup>50</sup> 'the silence of the night',<sup>51</sup> 'I should not have silenced this'.<sup>52</sup> One of these occurs in a note on ellipsis,<sup>53</sup> and, indeed ellipsis as a means of deceit, whether intended or not, is one of the reasons silence is subject to negative moral judgement. De Man's explanation is an example of ellipsis: by failing to disclose relevant details of his employment, he provided false testimony about his collaboration. His silence from 1949, when he began teaching in America, to 1983 involves a greater ellipsis: by failing to acknowledge his wartime journalism he presented a false impression of his character as an academic. In both cases, pertinent facts were omitted for the purposes of deception. Even if de Man did not intend to

deceive, his ellipsis had that effect, which was foreseeable, and for which he was thus responsible. Consider the contrast with Campbell. Campbell has every opportunity to remain silent about his doubts as to what he would have done in the event of Nazi victory, but deceives the authorities into believing that he was (only) a collaborator in order to confess. De Man has every opportunity to confess his wartime journalism, but keeps silent – to the authorities, to friends, colleagues, and students – in order to deceive them about his collaboration. Even where ellipsis is not intended to deceive but that which is omitted itself invites a negative judgement, the ellipsis will be perceived as deception precisely because – in the silence – no alternative explanation is offered. I shall return to this point in §6.

While Campbell is betrayed by his only friend, George Kraft (who is actually a Soviet agent), de Man betrayed his friend, Derrida, both as a friend and as a *Jewish* friend. Derrida unwittingly condemns de Man's ellipsis when he describes his own reaction to "*Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle*". If de Man could find no other reason to confess, he should have considered the consequences of exposure for Derrida. That the exposure was posthumous may have been convenient for de Man, but was distressingly inopportune for Derrida, who had to defend his friend *in absentia*. He describes 'the wound I right away felt' upon reading the 'unbearable' review<sup>54</sup> – which must have cut all the more deep given the childhood wound of anti-Semitism that had never healed – and gives three reasons for his 'painful surprise':

- (1) some of these articles or certain phrases in them seemed to manifest, in a certain way, an alliance with what has always been for me the very worst; (2) for almost twenty years, I had never had the least reason to suspect my friend could be the author of such articles (I will come back again to this fact); (3) I had read, a short while

earlier, the only text that was accessible to me up until then and that was written and signed by Paul de Man in Belgium during the war.<sup>55</sup>

*Contra* Derrida and Kermode, de Man's silence is indeed blameworthy: it constitutes a case of deception by means of ellipsis or, at the very least, can be reasonably perceived as such.

## 6. Silence and Remorselessness

The second problem with silence is related, but distinct: silence is usually understood as consent or assent. Dissent is voiced, but there is no need to voice one's approval – it is simply assumed in the absence of dissent. To be silent about an action is to condone that action whether the agent is oneself or another. To be silent about one's past is to condone that past and where that past is morally tainted the silence expresses a lack of not only regret, but remorse. The distinction is set out by R.M. Hare, who identifies remorse as being accompanied by a desire for reversibility.<sup>56</sup> Hare's most convincing example concerns the master of a ship travelling in a wartime convoy. When a sailor falls overboard the master decides not to break formation and risk losing his ship to a submarine attack, and thus leaves the man to drown. Assuming he is not a moral monster, the master would feel regret at the death of a human being for whom he is responsible and which he could have prevented. He does not, however, feel remorse because he does not believe that he ought to have broken formation to save the sailor and would not do so were the situation to recur. If an action is harmful, but necessary, one expects a moral agent to feel regret. For some, collaborating with the Nazis may have fallen into this category.

One could – perhaps *should*, as I suggested in §3 – attribute de Man's work for *Le Soir* in terms of an ulterior motive, the need to support his family in a dangerous time and place, but

one would at least expect an expression of regret for his collaboration. It is noteworthy that in neither of his responses – to the *Auditeur Général* or the Harvard Society of Fellows – did he admit to collaboration. And yet he clearly did collaborate, despite Derrida's defence of "*Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle*" as ironic and the significance Derrida and Felman accord to de Man's use of the word "vulgar" to describe anti-Semitism.<sup>57</sup> The issue at stake is *why* he collaborated, not *whether* he collaborated, which is why I characterised his silence as deceit by ellipsis in §5. If, as Derrida seems to suggest, there was duress of some sort<sup>58</sup> – perhaps, *contra* Barish, he had been instructed to contribute to the anti-Semitic page on which his review appeared at the risk of dismissal – then one would expect a subsequent expression of regret, even if that expression was delayed. If there were no such conditions then the anti-Semitism was de Man's opinion at the time and one would expect a subsequent expression of remorse. Neither regret nor remorse were expressed in 1955. In the absence of such expressions, one can only regard his silence as evidence that he neither regretted his collaboration, nor experienced remorse for his actions. And, as with silence and ellipsis, even if the motivation for silence was not remorselessness, de Man should have realised that it would be perceived as such, and taken action to avoid this (mis)perception.

It might be argued that silence is not, in the circumstances under discussion, evidence of remorselessness and that what is most important is whether de Man experienced regret or remorse, not whether he communicated these feelings privately or publically. Consider two contrasting possibilities: (1) de Man devotes himself to a worthy cause in secret, assisting holocaust survivors, by way of reparation for "*Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle*"; and (2) de Man confesses authorship, but disowns responsibility for a juvenile error (as suggested by Kermode) or a review written under duress (as suggested by Derrida). In the former case, de Man's private repentance would invite positive judgement in the light of which his failure to

confess would be of little significance. In the latter case, a public confession would not allay concerns about his sense of remorse and may even invite a more negative judgement than his silence.<sup>59</sup> When discussing Felman's accusation of forgetting in §3, I noted that no one except de Man could know how much of the war he forgot in the literal sense. The same is true of his sense of remorse. Given that the controversy was posthumous, none of de Man's accusers or defenders in the eighties could have known whether his conscience was plagued by his collaboration any more than one can know now. Nor, I maintain, would it have been possible during his lifetime. One can profess regret and remorse just as one can profess forgetfulness, but no one except the individual who has – or does not have – the sense of guilt can ever be certain. Human beings lack direct access to other minds and must therefore rely on the testimony of others and observation of their actions. Neither testimony nor actions are completely reliable guides to motivation and *in lieu* of an ever-absent certainty, moral judgements must be based on inferences from the available evidence.

In my discussion of the complexity of collaboration in §3, I offered a third option in cooperation, but the distinction between collaboration and cooperation is, as noted, opaque. Ethan Hollander raises doubts as to whether cooperation can be distinguished from collaboration by claiming that negotiation is 'institutionally indistinguishable from "collaboration"'.<sup>60</sup> In her rigorous argument for a particular type of cooperation, rhetorical resistance, Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp identifies the problem as epistemic in nature: 'It might fairly be asked when we can know that such deference is a performance and not an expression of wholehearted collaboration.'<sup>61</sup> Her response establishes 'collaborative intent' as the distinctive criterion such that the same action may have been committed with or without the intention to collaborate and should be classified on the basis of that intention.<sup>62</sup> The criterion is appropriate to her methodology, which employs both diaries written by

residents of Guernsey when the outcome of the war was uncertain as well as the documentation of the German authorities.<sup>63</sup> Assuming that the islanders represented their true motives in their private diaries, it seems reasonable to infer that those – such as Frank Falla – who may have at times appeared to be collaborating were merely cooperating. In Falla's case, his true sympathies were exposed in April 1944, when he and four colleagues were arrested and charged with the distribution of BBC news. All five spent the last year of the war imprisoned in Germany, during which time one of them died.<sup>64</sup> In de Man's case, however, there is no diary and no documentation from the Germans. The evidence is therefore limited to his actions, i.e. his silence and the answer he gave to the Harvard Society of Fellows, neither of which expressed regret or remorse. The silence offers evidence of assent – because he appears to have believed that he had done nothing wrong and therefore had nothing to be regretful or remorseful about. And as I noted in §5 with regard to ellipsis as deception, silence furthermore offers no alternative explanation.

It is here that the contrast with Campbell is at its clearest. I opposed Campbell and de Man in §5: one deceived in order to confess and was betrayed by a friend; the other kept silent in order to deceive and betrayed his friends. The juxtaposition extends far beyond these two points and is almost uncanny in its precision. Campbell was a fictional character who wrote fiction, whose collaboration had a significant impact, and who had a belated desire for confession and judgement. De Man was a historical figure who wrote literary criticism, whose collaboration had a negligible impact, and who either dissembled or kept silent about his war. Where Campbell's desire for judgement was so strong that he resorted to an uncompromising self-judgement when no other form was available, de Man successfully avoided being the subject of judgement for his entire life. Campbell's remorse (or regret, he does not specify whether his guilt includes a desire for reversibility) vindicated his tarnished

character in the posthumous publication of his confession by Vonnegut; de Man's character was tarnished by the posthumous republication of his wartime journalism. There are numerous further oppositions that could be drawn, but I have already stated the most important, the different attitudes adopted towards their past indiscretions: Campbell had an urgent need to confess, to avoid what he regarded as a deceitful exoneration of his character and express his remorse; de Man had an urgent need to hide his collaboration, to deceitfully exonerate his character in his new life in America. The contrast could not be greater and is useful because – in yet another contrast – it is easy to understand what one admires in Campbell and that admiration sheds light on what one finds distasteful in de Man, which is not immediately obvious.

The motive behind de Man's wartime journalism will, as I have emphasised throughout this essay, never be known. As such, I am in agreement with the majority of the commentators who did not employ the controversy as an opportunity to attack Derrida or deconstructive criticism, and the charge of collaboration can be dismissed. In §3 I suggested that forgetting was either subject to the same epistemic problem as the collaboration – no one but de Man can ever be certain as to why he collaborated, how much of the war he remembered, or whether he had a guilty conscience – or could be subsumed under the third charge, silence. It is Campbell's admirable refusal to be silent, even when one might think he had earned the right to do so, that reveals the culpability in de Man's silence. Their respective methods of dealing with morally-tainted pasts show precisely what is blameworthy in de Man's silence, the deceit by ellipsis and the absence of remorse or regret. What de Man did wrong was therefore to keep silent about his war. Whatever negative judgements that silence invites – and I have argued for deceit and remorselessness – it was also blameworthy in a third way,



for leaving a mess for others to clean up – a *wound* which friends, colleagues, and followers were left to bear.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Barish, *The Double Life of Paul de Man* (New York: Liveright, 2014), 99-103.

<sup>2</sup> Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939-43* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 45.

<sup>3</sup> David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon, 1991 [1992]), 209.

<sup>4</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 136.

<sup>5</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 158.

<sup>6</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 161.

<sup>7</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 163-169.

<sup>8</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 193-202.

<sup>9</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 210-211.

<sup>10</sup> David Lehman, "Paul de Man: The Plot Thickens," *New York Times*, May 24, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/24/books/paul-de-man-the-plot-thickens.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>11</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 349-352; Shoshana Felman, "Paul de Man's Silence," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989), 704-744: 720-721.

<sup>12</sup> In both *Signs of the Times* and "The Plot Thickens".

<sup>13</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 260-262.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Menand, "The De Man Case: Does a critic's past explain his criticism?," *The New Yorker*, March 24, 2014, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2014/03/24/140324cra\\_tlarge\\_menand?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2014/03/24/140324cra_tlarge_menand?currentPage=all).

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, "From *Psyche*," in Derek Attridge, ed., *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 310-343: 313.

<sup>16</sup> See: Derrida, "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989), 812-873.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Marie Apostolides, "On Paul de Man's War," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989), 765-766

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>19</sup> I lack space to discuss how my conclusion regarding De Man may be extended to other cases of collaboration (with the Nazis and other totalitarian regimes), but my failure to accord the details of his personal circumstances too much prominence should be taken as evidence of my belief in the condemnation of similar cases of silence in the context of a morally-tainted past.

<sup>20</sup> Felman, "Paul de Man's Silence," 705.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988), 590-652: 621.

<sup>22</sup> Barish maintains that De Man wrote the article in order to secure a column for himself – "Our Literary Chronicle", which began on 18 March 1941 – and employs it as further evidence of his extreme opportunism (*The Double Life*, 117-127). I suspect she is correct, but an argument could of course be made that his ambition was geared towards providing for his rapidly-growing family, not to mention a fiancée with extravagant tastes.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Barry Turner, *Outpost of Occupation: How the Channel Islands Survived Nazi Rule 1940-45* (London: Aurum, 2010), 102. Turner is not convinced by Falla's defence, but he lacks sensitivity with regard to the circumstances of the occupation of the Channel Islands in general and Guernsey in particular. I return to Falla in §6 and Lord Haw-Haw in §4.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Kermode, "Paul de Man's Abyss," *London Review of Books* 11 (16 March 1989), 3-7, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n06/frank-kermode/paul-de-mans-abyss#>.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 638.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 638.

<sup>27</sup> Kermode, "Paul de Man's Abyss."

<sup>28</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 29-24; 57.

<sup>29</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, *Mother Night* (St Albans: Triad/Panther 1961 [1979]).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example: Adrian Weale, *Renegades: Hitler's Englishmen* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994); and Phil Froom, "Fred Koenig: A SS Grenadier From Chicago USA," *Axis History*, 22 July 2012 (accessed 13 June 2013), <http://www.axishistory.com/axis-nations/germany-a-austria/waffen-ss/124-germany-waffen-ss/germany-waffen-ss-other/6182-fred-koenig-a-ss-grenadier-from-chicago-usa>.

<sup>31</sup> Critical interest in Vonnegut's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in fiction has focused on *Slaughterhouse Five* at the expense of *Mother Night*. Unlike the former, the latter was not particularly well-received (Martin Amis in *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000* [Jonathan Cape, 2001] is a notable exception) and is usually categorised as an "early", i.e. pre-*Slaughterhouse Five*, novel. Even in this category, however, interest

in *Mother Night* is eclipsed by *Cat's Cradle*, which enjoyed popular success three years after publication in 1963 and earned Vonnegut his first major publishing contract. Discussions of *Mother Night* tend to be brief and restricted to narrowly-defined aspects of the novel, for example: Edward Jamosky & Jerome Klinkowitz, "Kurt Vonnegut's Three *Mother Nights*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 34 (1988), 216-220; Lawrence R. Broer, *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 45-56; and Robert Merrill, "Kurt Vonnegut as a German-American," in Peter Freese, ed., *Germany and German Thought in American Literature and Cultural Criticism* (Essen: Blaue Eule, 1990), 230-243. Donald E. Morse displays a broader, thematic concern in *The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut: Imagining Being an American* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 53-58, but his treatment is also brief. For a recent overview of Vonnegut criticism, which is representative in mentioning *Mother Night* only once – and in conjunction with *Cat's Cradle* – see: Peter Freese, "The Critical Reception of Kurt Vonnegut," *Literature Compass* 9/1 (2012), 1-14.

<sup>32</sup> See: "Editor's Note," Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, ix-xi.

<sup>33</sup> The narrative of the novel is a-chronological, switching back and forth between decades as Campbell makes his confession from his prison cell prior to his trial.

<sup>34</sup> Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, viii.

<sup>36</sup> Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, 70-72.

<sup>37</sup> Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, 65-66.

<sup>38</sup> Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> *Mother Night*, 175.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, "Abraham, the Other," trans. Gil Anidjar in Bettina Berg, Joseph Cohen & Raphael Zagury-Orly, eds., *Judeites: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003 [2007]), 1-35: 6.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, "Abraham, the Other," 16.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 637.

<sup>43</sup> Felman, "Paul de Man's Silence," 720.

<sup>44</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 196. Joseph Meulepas was an editor at *Le Soir*, Marc Eemans a surrealist painter who had campaigned against degenerate art and wrote occasional articles for the paper, and Raymond de Becker the editor-in-chief appointed by the Nazis.

<sup>45</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 201.

<sup>46</sup> Barish, *The Double Life*, 135-150.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 624.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, "Biodegradables," 819.

<sup>49</sup> Derrida, "Biodegradables," 835.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, "Biodegradables," 854.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, "Biodegradables," 862.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, "Biodegradables," 867fn.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, "Biodegradables," 854.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 621.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 600.

<sup>56</sup> R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 28-30.

<sup>57</sup> See: Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 623-632; and Felman, "Paul de Man's Silence," 712-713.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, "Paul de Man's War," 631.

<sup>59</sup> I am grateful to Tzachi Zamir for drawing this point to my attention.

<sup>60</sup> Ethan J. Hollander, "The Banality of Goodness: Collaboration and Compromise in the Rescue of Denmark's Jews," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 6 (2013), 41-66: 42.

<sup>61</sup> Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp, *Discourse and Defiance Under Nazi Occupation: Guernsey, Channel Islands, 1940-1945* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 148.

<sup>62</sup> Jorgensen-Earp, *Discourse and Defiance*, 150.

<sup>63</sup> Jorgensen-Earp, *Discourse and Defiance*, 98.

<sup>64</sup> Frank W. Falla, *The Silent War: The inside story of the Channel Islands under the Nazi jackboot* (London: New English Library, 1967 [1968]), 107. See my previous comment on Falla in §3 fn.22.

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